



## MECKLENBURG COUNTY

July 30, 2003

### **Commuter Choice Employee Benefits Program Implementation Plan**

In an effort to attract and retain top quality employees, Mecklenburg County is continuously looking for new additions to its already outstanding suite of benefits. After a recent recommendation by the Mecklenburg Board of County Commissioners, the County has developed a plan to enhance the current commuter choice program for County government so that it includes the benefits that meet United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) criteria for the "Commuter Choice Leadership Initiative".

Commuter Choice programs are designed to provide employees with attractive, low cost alternatives to driving to work in single occupancy vehicles. The programs can include telecommuting and flexible work schedule options, transit benefits or parking cash out. Benefits that encourage using mass transit or other means of taking single occupancy vehicles off the road can be included in the program as well.

Offering a commuting benefits program is a low-cost option that will allow Mecklenburg County Government to save employees money, improve employee morale and gain national recognition through EPA. According to EPA, a typical commuter who drives to work alone can save more than \$800 per year by using commuter benefits for transit, walking, cycling, or telecommuting. In addition to the cost savings, the Metropolitan Transportation Commission conducted a survey in San Francisco that showed 80% of employees reporting a higher opinion of their employer after receiving commuter benefits. While taking advantage of the tax saving tools already in place to offer this benefit to employees, Mecklenburg County can also enjoy national recognition through EPA as a result of the environmental impacts of establishing a commuter benefits program. By using computer modeling techniques, EPA predicts that if half of all employees in the U.S. worked for Commuter Choice Employers, air pollution and traffic would be cut by the equivalent of taking 15 million cars off the road every year.

The goal of this implementation plan is to outline the specific components of Mecklenburg County's commuter benefits program, define the steps needed to put the program in place, and propose efforts to meet EPA's Standard of Excellence participation level. By investing the time and money to implement a commuter choice program that meets EPA criteria for the "Commuter Choice Leadership Initiative," Mecklenburg County will show the community that it is committed to striving for a better workplace for employees and a healthier environment for all of us.

**PEOPLE • PRIDE • PROGRESS • PARTNERSHIPS**

700 N. Tryon Street • Suite 205 • Charlotte, NC 28202-2236 • (704) 336-5500 • FAX (704) 336-4391

[www.charmeck.org/Departments/luesa/home.asp](http://www.charmeck.org/Departments/luesa/home.asp)

## ***Current Status***

Mecklenburg County currently offers the following commuter benefits:

- discounted monthly bus passes
- 50% contribution towards monthly bus passes
- pre-tax deduction for the remaining cost of a monthly bus pass
- guaranteed ride home program for employees who purchase their monthly bus pass through the County.<sup>1</sup>
- telecommuting
- secure bicycle parking, showers and lockers are available
- flexible/compressed work schedules

The current percentage of employees taking advantage of these commuter benefits is unknown.

## ***Commuter Choice Leadership Initiative Requirements***

- Primary Benefit: Provide one of three options.
  1. Transit or vanpool benefits
  2. Parking cash out
  3. Telecommuting
- Secondary Benefits: Provide three or more.

1. Ridesharing or carpool matching	11. Secure bicycle parking, showers and lockers
2. Pre-tax transit or vanpool benefits	12. Electric bicycle recharging
3. Parking cashout	13. Employee commuting awards programs
4. Shuttles from transit stations	14. Discounts and coupons for bicycles for bicyclists or shoes for walkers
5. Parking at park-and-ride lots or vanpool staging areas	15. Compressed work schedules
6. Provision of intelligent commuting information	16. Telecommuting
7. Preferred parking for carpools and vanpools	17. Lunchtime shuttle
8. Reduced parking costs for carpools and vanpools	18. Proximate commute
9. Employer run vanpools or subscription bus programs	19. Incentives to encourage employees to live closer to work
10. Employer assisted vanpools	20. On-site amenities
	21. Concierge services
	22. Other options as proposed by the EmployerProvide access to a guaranteed ride home.

---

1

If the rider misses their bus or has an emergency during the day, the monthly bus pass allows them to call a taxi and be driven to where their car is parked. This benefit can be assessed twice per month.

- Designate a central point of contact to manage the contract with EPA.
- Provide access to a guaranteed ride home.
- Exceed a participation level 14% of employees not driving alone to work within 18 months of signing the agreement.
- Report program progress and success to EPA
  - Annual benefit reporting
  - Bi-annual participation reporting

### ***Proposed Benefits for Mecklenburg County Commuter Choice Program***

<b>Components</b>	<b>Proposed Benefit</b>	<b>Current Status</b>
Primary Benefit	Employer agrees to provide, at least \$30 per month toward commuting via public transit or vanpool for employees whose actual commuting costs are \$30 or more, and they are encouraged to provide up to the IRS monthly limit of \$100. If the employees' commuting costs are less than \$30, then the Employer must cover 100% of these costs.	The County's current contribution of ½ the cost of a bus pass does not meet the minimum contribution requirement. The average contribution is \$18 per person per month and ranges from \$16 to \$30. To meet the requirements of the agreement the County will pay the entire cost of any bus pass that is less than \$30. If the price of the bus pass is greater than thirty dollars, the County will contribute half the cost of the pass or \$30 whichever is greater. This will result in a 77% increase in cost to the County. The current monthly contribution is \$2,432 for 135 participants. The new plan for the same 135 participants will cost \$3,750.
Secondary Benefits	Telecommuting	Currently available. Presently 300 hours per week are classified as telecommuting hours. No additional cost to the County.

	Compressed work schedules	Currently available. No additional cost to the County.
	Pre-tax transit or vanpool benefits	Currently available. No additional cost to the County.
Guaranteed Ride Home		Currently available to monthly express bus pass holders and vanpool riders through CATS. Options for program participants who are not covered through CATS include use of a County car or a taxi ride paid for by the County. See Appendix B for a complete description of the proposed benefit.
Central Point of Contact		Susan Hutchins County Human Resources Director
Exceed Participation Level		Timetable for meeting required participation level will be established based on survey results.

Mecklenburg County will conduct a baseline participation survey in accordance with EPA guidance.

### ***Methods to Encourage Participation***

- Discuss Commuter Choice Program during the new employee orientation sessions.
- Offer incentive drawings for Commuter Choice participants. Ideas for incentives are:
  - preferred parking for carpoolers
  - bike shop gift certificate for a bike rider (drawing)
  - carwash or gas for a carpooler (drawing)
  - “Prize Patrol” to catch “smart commuters”
- Advertise program on MeckWeb.
- Include article in Outlook.
- Offer workshop through Human Resources.
- Recognize employees who participate with certificates, plaques, etc.

## **Implementation Time Line**

### **Goal: 1/1/03      MCAQ and HR approve implementation plan**

*Plan was discussed in a January 28, 2003 meeting attended by County Human Resources and Mecklenburg County Air Quality Staff. The plan was revised and approved. A decision was made to form a Commuter Choice Committee to make implementation suggestions and maintain program requirements.*

### **Goal: 4/1/03 Establish Commuter Choice Committee**

*The Commuter Choice Committee had its first meeting on April 15, 2003. The Committee is comprised of the following people:*

*Air Quality Staff- Erica Shah*

*Air Quality Staff- Leslie Rhodes*

*County Human Resources Representative - Eric Lanier*

*CATS Representative - Krystel McCray/ Zettie Phillips*

*City Human Resources Representative - Anna Ellis (if City chooses to have a similar program)*

*Marketing/Communications - Alan Giles*

*Current Bus Pass Program Participant - Undetermined*

*The committee's purpose is to facilitate the implementation and maintenance of the Commuter Choice Employee Benefits Program for Mecklenburg County employees and potentially City employees as well.*

### **Goal: 5/02/03 - Announce Mecklenburg County's Participation in the Commuter Choice Leadership Initiative Program**

*Committee is planning to kick off the program at an event sponsored by Charlotte Area Transit System on May 2, 2003 at the Government Center.*

### **Goal: 10/01/03: Survey employees to determine current participation level**

### **Goal: 1/01/04: Establish time line for meeting participation level.**

# Appendix A

## Survey Procedure

According to guidance and information obtained from EPA, the following steps must be taken to accurately assess the participation level.

1. For a company with 5,000-9,999 eligible employees<sup>2</sup> a random sample of 1063 people must be surveyed.
2. Obtain a complete list of eligible Mecklenburg County employees.
3. A random number between 1 and the total number of employees should be selected.
4. A sampling interval should be calculated by dividing the number of eligible employees by the number of employees who must be surveyed. Round this number down to the nearest whole number,  $n$ .
5. Using the number  $n$  calculated in step 4, count off each “ $n$ th” employee starting at the starting number calculated in step 3 with each of the “ $n$ th” employees selected to be surveyed.
6. The survey and a cover letter describing its purpose should then be distributed to the randomly selected employees. See attached sample survey.
7. At least 70% of the surveys must be returned.

---

<sup>2</sup> Employees who are eligible include the following: those who are on your organization’s payroll and assigned to your worksite including night shift, or teleworking employees; have an assigned workstation at your site; part-time employees who work half time or more; or contractors at your worksite who are not on your organization’s payroll but are allowed to take part in your organization’s benefits.

## Appendix B

### Emergency Ride Home Program

One of the benefits that is required under the *Best Workplaces for Commuters Program* (formerly the *Commuter Choice Leadership Initiative*) is an emergency ride home (ERH). This benefit would provide employees who commute via transit, car pool, van pool, bicycle, or walking with transportation in the event of a personal emergency or unscheduled work after hours. This would encourage employees to commute by one of these means without the fear of being stranded at work. According to recent EPA information, this program would be very low cost in terms of direct (taxi) and indirect (staff time) costs. Past studies have shown few problem with abuse of the program mainly because the employer can place restrictions on the circumstances surrounding the use of the emergency ride home.

Several options for the Mecklenburg County program were considered, and it was decided that the most effective choice would be the use of a taxi service. To be considered an active participant in the program and to be able to use the ERH benefit, commuters will need to register (see attached form *Emergency Ride Home Registration*) and review the guidelines (see attached *Emergency Ride Home Guidelines*). A copy of the registration form will be kept with the Program administrator and the employee's direct Supervisor. When an emergency arises, the employee will need to report it to their Supervisor and obtain approval to leave work (or in the case of unscheduled overtime, obtain permission to use the service). An attempt to find a Mecklenburg County vehicle should then be made. If one is not found, then a taxi service should be contacted and arrangements made to pick up the employee. Upon returning to work, the employee should fill out the ERH Use form (to be created at a later time) and turn it in to their budget officer in order to be reimbursed. Money for this program will come from each Department's travel fund. Use of this program will be limited to six rides per year.